Chickens on the NASA prairie

by Johannes T. Ragin

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The ground-dwelling Attwater's Prairie Chicken is a medium-sized grouse with brown, black and buff-colored feathers.

URBANIZATION AND HABITAT LOSS pose a serious threat to much of the wildlife in the Gulf Coast region. When settlers first arrived in Texas, more than 6 million Attwater's Prairie Chickens could be found scattered over the Texas Gulf coast. Today, this bird is an endangered species and estimates are that fewer than 50 remain in the wild. In an attempt to survive, the prairie chicken will be moving back to the NASA prairie for an extended stay.

"Due to habitat loss and the fact that the prairie chicken was an important resource to early settlers of the Gulf Coast region, the numbers have dropped dramatically," Sandra Parker, environmental specialist at JSC, said.

In Texas, the bird survives at only two remaining preserves: the Attwater's Prairie Chicken National Wildlife Refuge near Eagle Lake and the Nature Conservancy's Refuge near Texas City. To prevent extinction of this prairie chicken species, the Houston Zoo participates in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' statewide Recovery Program.

The Zoo constructed a small exhibit area to breed and raise the chicks until they are old enough to be relocated to the preserves. Unfortunately, Houston's growth and the noise level of the Medical Center have disturbed the birds at the Zoo's area, making breeding this rare species much more difficult.

The males have golden neck sacks that, during mating season, they use to produce a booming sound that can be heard for half a mile.

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The Prairie Chicken Partnership not only benefits the Houston Zoo but JSC as well.

To combat the unfavorable conditions, the Zoo's then-president Philip Cannon initiated a partnership with JSC to set aside one-half acre of NASA prairie, located south of Bldg. 424, to house the chickens.

JSC approved the partnership and a Space Act Agreement was drawn up to clarify the Zoo's responsibility in the project. Under this agreement, the Houston Zoo has sole responsibility for the assembly and maintenance of the project. Houston Zoo employees will work on site at JSC to manage and maintain the prairie chickens.

The partnership's genesis grew out of a chance meeting between Cannon and Howell. "As they talked about the missions of their respective organizations, it became clear there were areas of common interest and concern," Parker said.

"The JSC Team is excited about this partnership," JSC Director, Jefferson D. Howell Jr., said. "Part of NASA's mission is to understand and protect our home planet, and we are happy to play a small part in preserving the Attwater's Prairie Chicken population. This project also provides students an opportunity to see for themselves the important role that environmental management plays here on Earth and as humans venture further into space."

JSC employees are encouraged to avoid the prairie chicken habitat. The quiet and serene environment that JSC provides is what makes JSC such a promising location to raise these birds. Frequent visits could put stress on the birds and possibly disrupt the breeding process.

"JSC is a great location for the prairie chickens for a variety of reasons," Gail Johnson, assistant director for the Houston Zoo, said. "The land JSC has been able to offer is very quiet. Also, NASA is very secure and to find a remote location that is also patrolled 24/7 is not as easy as it looks. The area JSC is providing for the project is adjacent to a very wide prairie-like setting. We think this is very conducive for these birds."

The Prairie Chicken Partnership not only benefits the Houston Zoo but JSC as well. The project will be part of JSC's educational outreach program, which seeks to foster the next generation of explorers by encouraging young people to study math and science. The facility will give area students an opportunity to see first-hand the importance of habitat conservation and protection.

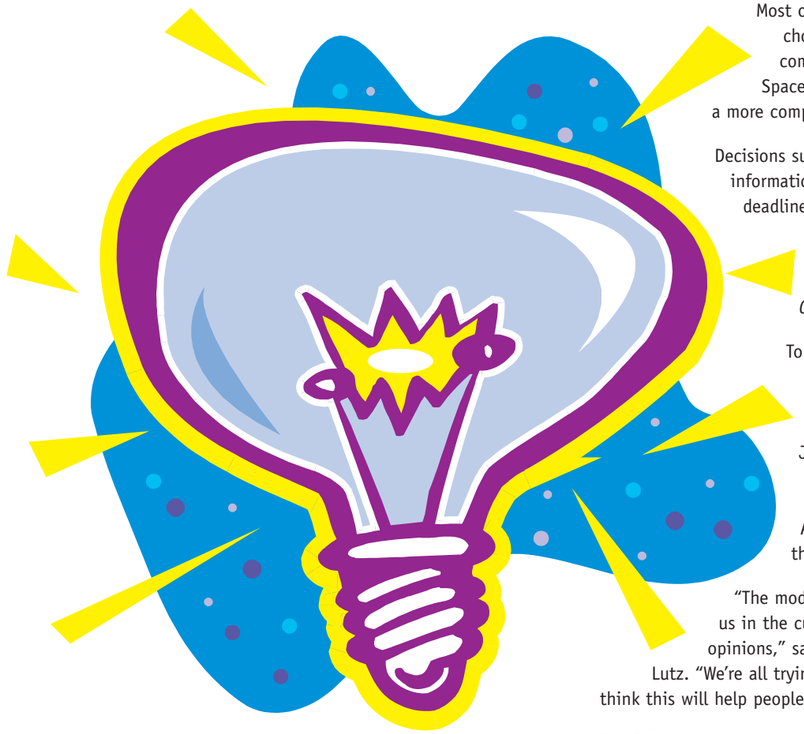
"This project is tied back to our NASA mission, to increase educational opportunities, and to protect the home planet," Parker said.

Decisions, decisions...

Decision-making tool to help JSC team members with choices big and small

by Kendra Phipps

Every day, we make hundreds of little decisions. Which shirt should I wear? What's the fastest route to work? What do I want for dinner?



Most of us have no trouble making these choices day in and day out. But a more complex dilemma – such as whether a Space Shuttle can safely launch – calls for a more complex thought-process.

Decisions such as these often involve technical information, conflicting opinions and pressing deadlines. These tense situations are a part of the "NASA Culture" that the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board (CAIB) criticized after the *Columbia* accident.

To help facilitate these complex decisions – and improve communication and culture in the process – the Johnson Space Center Joint Leadership Team (JLT) has introduced the Decision-Making Process Model. The Extravehicular Activity (EVA) Office has been testing the model for several weeks.

"The model has a strong emphasis on helping us in the cultural change of dissenting opinions," said EVA Office Deputy Manager Glenn Lutz. "We're all trying to make that cultural change. I think this will help people in that regard."

The JLT was formed to address leadership and culture issues raised by the CAIB and by employee discussions during Safety and Mission Success Week in 2003. The JLT consists of senior NASA officials and senior contractor management, who work as a collaborative team.

"NASA – and JSC in particular – is committed to a safety first attitude. This new decision-making model helps ensure we maintain that focus on safety as a priority in everything we do. Every one of us – from those who maintain facilities to those who oversee spaceflight – shares this commitment and this model helps unite all of us in that cause," Bill Parsons, manager of the Space Shuttle Program, said.

The Decision-Making Process Model was developed in line with the JLT's objectives of improving leadership capabilities, processes and culture across the Center. It was designed to standardize the decision-making process across JSC.

The model is located at **http://decisionmodel.jsc.nasa.gov/** and includes access to a number of tools, tips and resources for employees and decision-makers. For example, a set of detailed presentation templates is available for the most common types of JSC presentations. For issues that are too complex to fit easily into a slide presentation format, the Web site also provides a standardized white paper template.

The model also walks users through the decision-making process. It provides a detailed flow-chart indicating how to make sure everyone's opinion is heard and what to do if there are dissenting opinions after the decision has been made.

Lutz said he thinks the training and testing within the EVA Office has been successful so far.

"As with all things, there's a learning curve, but we think it's going to be beneficial and will ensure consistency," Lutz said.

The Decision-Making Process Model can be used for any decision at JSC, from whether to paint an office to whether to launch a Shuttle. Lutz said that the EVA teams have been using the model for many types of decisions involving technical information, configuration control changes and problem descriptions. He said that the model will be used to determine flight readiness for future Shuttle missions.

Center-wide employee training on the Decision-Making Process Model will begin soon.

"This is just common sense," Lutz said of the model. "It's the right thing to do."

"Few things in the world are more powerful than a positive push. A smile. A world of optimism and hope. A 'you can do it' when things are tough."

Richard M. DeVos